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Tunisia: Current Issues

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Summary

Tunisia has a stable, authoritarian government led by President Zine ben Ali, who is expected to be reelected on October 24, 2004. Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally party controls parliament, state and local governments, and most political activity. There are significant limitations on human rights, although the advancement of women and girls is a positive note. Tunisia has experienced occasional attacks by Islamist terrorists, and Tunisian expatriates have been arrested in Europe and North America on terrorism-related charges. Tunisia is a non-oil-exporting, middle-class country with a diverse, growing economy, with high unemployment. It has long enjoyed good relations with the United States. The Tunisian government did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 war against Iraq, but its criticism was circumspect and did not harm bilateral ties. For related background, see CRS Report RL31017, *The Barcelona Process: The European Union's Partnership with the Southern Mediterranean*. This report will be updated as developments warrant.

Government

Tunisia has a stable, authoritarian government that places a higher priority on economic growth than on political liberalization, arguing that the former will gradually become the basis for the latter. Zine el-Abidine ben Ali, a former Minister of National Security and Minister of the Interior, has been president since 1987. He won a third term with 99.44% of the vote in 1999, when he faced an officially sanctioned opposition for the first time. Constitutional amendments approved in May 2002 lifted term limits for the presidency and raised the maximum age allowed for a candidate to 75. The 68-year-old Ben Ali is running for a fourth term in an October 24, 2004 election and is expected to achieve an easy victory. He would then be eligible to seek a fifth term in 2009. The largest "official" opposition party, the Movement of Social Democrats (MDS), supports Ben Ali's reelection. Leaders of three smaller "official" opposition parties are running against him. ("Official" opposition parties are those which the government allows to hold seats in parliament.) The powerful President appoints the Prime Minister, the cabinet, and 24 regional governors. The current Prime Minister is Mohammed Ghannouchi.

Ben Ali's party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique, or RCD), controls the Chamber of Deputies, or parliament,

holding 148 out of 182 seats. Five weak, official opposition parties, whose programs are largely indistinguishable from that of the RCD, share the remaining, reserved 34 seats. They sometimes decry the lack of democracy, but they lack media access and have no effect on Tunisian politics. Parliamentary elections also are being held on October 24, with the RCD expected to retain its dominance. "Elections are regularly characterized by notable irregularities, including voter intimidation, and there is no secret ballot."¹ Parliament does not originate legislation, but passes government bills with minor changes, if any. The RCD controls state institutions, local governments, and most political activity. Municipal elections are scheduled for May 2005.

Basic Facts	
Population	10 million (2004 est.)
Gross Domestic Product Growth Rate	5.1% (2003 est.)
GDP per capita	\$6,900 (2003 est.)
Inflation rate	2.7% (2003 est.)
Unemployment rate	14.3% (2003 est.)
Exports	textiles, mechanical goods, phosphates, chemicals, agricultural products
Imports	textiles, machinery and equipment, hydrocarbons
Trading Partners	France, Italy, Germany Spain, Libya

Source: CIA, *The World Factbook*, 2004

Terrorism

The Tunisian government harshly suppressed what it considered to be a violent, domestic Islamist terrorist group, An-Nahdah, (Renaissance) in 1991 after unearthing an alleged conspiracy. An-Nahdah denied the charge, and some analysts consider An-Nahdah's leader in exile, Rashid Ghannouchi, to be in the forefront of those seeking to accommodate Islam with democracy.²

The Tunisian Combat Group (TCG), which wants to establish an Islamic government in Tunisia, is a terrorist group of more recent vintage. It has been linked to Al-Qaeda and reportedly to the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat. The TCG was suspected of plotting attacks on U.S., Algerian, and Tunisian embassies in Rome in December 2001. The attacks were not carried out. In October 2002, the U.S. State Department froze the TCG's assets. According to European press reports, TCG members have trafficked false documents and recruited for terror training camps in

¹ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices — 2003, Tunisia*, February 25, 2004.

² Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Afghanistan.³ In early 2002, Tunisian authorities convicted 34 persons (31 in absentia) of belonging to another alleged terrorist group linked to Al-Qaeda — Al-Jamaa wal Sunnah (idiomatically, the Followers of Tradition). The government asserted that the accused were recruiting from the large population of European-based expatriate Tunisians to fight in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Afghanistan.⁴ Tunisian expatriates suspected of ties to Al-Qaeda have been arrested in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Western Europe, and the United States. Some are being detained at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Eleven out of 17 individuals added to a U.N. Security Council Al-Qaeda watch list in June 2003 were Tunisians, mainly residents of Italy. A Tunisian-Canadian was named on U.S. alert lists issued in 2003 and 2004 for allegedly plotting acts against the United States. He is said to have left messages promising suicide martyrdom found at the residence of Mohammed Atef, an Al-Qaeda leader killed in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri appears to have acknowledged an Al-Qaeda presence in Tunisia in a taped message broadcast by Al-Jazeera television in October 2002. Zawahiri seemed to claim responsibility for the bombing of a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba in April 2002, in which 21 tourists, mainly Germans, were killed.⁵ France, Spain, Italy, and Germany arrested expatriate Tunisians for alleged involvement in the attack.

In December 2003, the Tunisian parliament passed a sweeping antiterrorism law. The U.S. State Department calls it “a comprehensive law to ‘support the international effort to combat terrorism and money laundering,’” but Tunisian critics say that the law “makes the exercise of fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution an expression of terrorism.”⁶

Human Rights

As noted above, there are significant limitations on Tunisian citizens’ rights to change their government. The U.S. State Department has concluded that the government’s human rights record is poor and that it continues to commit serious abuses.⁷ The Department notes that security forces torture and physically abuse prisoners, arbitrarily arrest and detain individuals, and physically abuse, intimidate, and harass citizens who voice public criticism of the government. The government significantly restricts freedom of speech and of the press, and remains intolerant of public criticism, which it discourages by physical abuse, criminal investigations, the court system, arbitrary arrests, residential restrictions, and travel controls. It also restricts freedom of assembly and association.

International human rights groups have severely criticized the government and President Ben Ali personally. In February 2004, Reporters without Borders (RSF)

³ U.S. State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, 2003.

⁴ “Assets of Tunisia Group Are Frozen,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2002.

⁵ “Al-Qaeda Deputy Leader Signals Involvement in Attacks,” *Financial Times*, October 10, 2002.

⁶ *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, 2003, and Member of Parliament Moktar Jallali, quoted by Jeremy Landor, “Washington’s Partner,” *Middle East International*, March 5, 2004, pp. 23-24.

⁷ *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, above.

declared, “All the media in Tunisia — press, radio, and television — are subject to the whim of President Ben Ali and follow his orders.... Journalists who try to express dissenting views are constantly harassed, silenced, forced into exile, or just give up trying to work as journalists.” Moreover, RSF claimed, “the Tunisian government runs one of the world’s most extensive internet censorship operations.” RSF also faulted the President for suppressing demonstrations in support of a free and independent media.⁸ Amnesty International denounced the government for its “failure to keep its promises of achieving better human rights standards.”⁹ It observed a “cycle of injustice” in unlawful detentions, appalling prison conditions, including torture, prolonged solitary confinement, denial of medical treatment and family visits, and harassment of former prisoners following release.

The Ben Ali regime uses the fear of an Islamist threat and the example of Islamist-fueled civil conflict in neighboring Algeria to justify its human rights record and failure to carry out political reforms. Ben Ali maintains that he is ushering in democratic reforms in a “measured way” so that religious extremists cannot take advantages of freedoms.¹⁰ Yet, observers do not see any evidence of a government reform agenda.

On a positive note, Tunisia has long been in the forefront of Arab countries guaranteeing women rights, and affording them educational and career opportunities. It is the only Arab Muslim country that bans polygamy. Women serve in the military and the first woman governor was appointed in May 2004.

Economy and Trade

For about 15 years, Tunisia has been making the transition from a socialist to a market economy. With a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of \$6,900, it is considered a middle-class country, and one of the best-performing non-oil exporting Arab countries. Widespread home and car ownership support that characterization. In 2002, the GDP growth rate fell to 1.9% due to a drought, a slump in tourism following the terrorist attack on Djerba, and a recession in Europe, with which Tunisia has its strongest trade ties.¹¹ The economy recovered with an estimated growth rate of 5.1% in 2003.¹² The labor-intensive manufacturing sector, particularly textiles and automobile parts, is the primary engine of economic growth. Yet unemployment remains high, at an official rate of 14.3%, which in reality may be higher.¹³

In 1996, Tunisia entered into an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) to remove all tariff and other trade barriers on most goods by 2007. As part of the

⁸ Reporters Without Borders, press releases, February 4 and March 31, 2004.

⁹ “Amnesty Calls on Tunisia to Improve Human Rights Record,” *Agence France Press*, June 10, 2003.

¹⁰ “Tunisian President Says He Wants to Share Experience in Handling Islamic Extremism with Bush,” *Associated Press*, February 13, 2004.

¹¹ Economic statistics from CIA, *The World Factbook 2004*.

¹² “IMF Gives Thumbs up to Reforms Efforts,” *Middle East Economic Digest*, August 15, 2003.

¹³ U.S. Department of State, *Background Note: Tunisia*, September 2004.

agreement, the EU is assisting Tunisian businesses to prepare for global competition. More than 80% of Tunisia's trade is conducted with Europe. In 2003, Tunisia received \$69.3 million euros (U.S.\$76.2 million) in aid from the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (MEDA) program.¹⁴ The European Investment Bank, the financing arm of the EU, has provided substantial soft loans for Tunisian projects. Tunisia joined the World Trade Organization in 1995.

U.S.-Tunisian trade is relatively low in volume because Tunisia is a small country and conducts most of its trade with Europe. Tunisia ranks 15th as a source of U.S. imports and 17th as a target for U.S. exports out of 20 countries on the U.S. Trade Representative's Middle East and North Africa list. Tunisia is eligible for special trade preferences, i.e., duty-free entry for listed products, from the United States under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) Program. The United States and Tunisia have a trade investment framework agreement (TIFA) and a bilateral investment treaty (since 1993). The Tunisian government has expressed interest in concluding a free-trade agreement with the United States in the future. The United States enjoys a trade surplus with Tunisia: exports of \$171 million exceeded imports of \$100 million in 2003. Yet U.S. exports to Tunisia have declined since 1997, especially cereals and power-generating machinery and equipment, while imports, notably apparel and petroleum, have increased. Major U.S. exports are food (cereals, 23%, and vegetable fats, 19%), machinery (14%) and non-road vehicle transport equipment (6%). Major imports from Tunisia are textiles and apparel (37%) and petroleum (24%).¹⁵

Relations with the United States

The United States and Tunisia have enjoyed continuous relations since 1797. The U.S. government views Tunisia favorably as a moderate Arab, Muslim state. However, Tunisia did not support the 1991 Gulf War or the 2003 war against Iraq. When the 2003 war began, Ben Ali expressed regret and fear that the conflict might destabilize the Middle East.¹⁶ Tunisian officials' criticism was not voiced directly at the United States and was always circumspect, and their stance did not harm bilateral relations.

A U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission meets annually to discuss and cement military cooperation. Tunisia has agreed to exempt U.S. military personnel from jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. In FY2004, Tunisia received \$9.940 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and \$1.75 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds. For FY2005, the Administration has requested \$10 million in FMF and \$1.875 million in IMET to enhance Tunisia's value as a regional ally in the war on terror.¹⁷

¹⁴ See [<http://europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid/projects/med/financial/1995-2003.pdf>] for the history of MEDA aid to Tunisia.

¹⁵ This paragraph was prepared by Mary Jane Bolle, Specialist in International Trade, from information accessed at [<http://dataweb.usitc.gov>].

¹⁶ "Ben Ali Expresses 'Deep Regret' at Start of War Against Iraq," *Tunis Infotunisie*, Mar. 20, 2003, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Document AFP20030320000266.

¹⁷ Secretary of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations*, FY2005

Tunisia also participates in the U.S. State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI); a MEPI regional office opened in Tunis in August 2004.¹⁸ FY2003 MEPI programs included the Commercial Law Development Program funded at \$460,000, and the Humphrey Fellowships and Inter-University Links funded at \$540,000. MEPI aid has not supported the development of civil society or other democratization initiatives. Given the Administration's rhetorical emphasis on building democracy in the Middle East, critics suggest that it may be sending mixed signals to Tunisia by aiding the military while not supporting democratizing elements. Yet during President Ben Ali's visit to Washington in February 2004, Secretary of State Powell expressed U.S. interest "in carrying on political reforms, media openness, and other issues," and President Bush publicly said that he looked forward to discussing "the need to have a press corps that is vibrant and free, as well as an open political process." Ben Ali claimed to share the U.S. desire for "the establishment of states on the basis of democracy..." but also emphasized the "strategic dimension" of the bilateral relationship.¹⁹

Other Foreign Policy Issues

Tunisia sympathizes with the Palestinians; it hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in exile from 1982-1993 and still hosts some PLO offices today. Tunisia had an interests office in Israel until the outbreak of the Palestinian *intifadah*, or uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in 2000. President Ben Ali has called for the reactivation of the peace process and for international protection for the Palestinian people, while sharply criticizing Israel's use of force in the occupied territories.²⁰ Nonetheless, Israelis of Tunisian descent are allowed to travel to Tunisia on Israeli passports, and the Israeli and Tunisian foreign ministers have met three times in 2004.

As noted above, Tunisia and the European Union have cemented a close relationship by means of an Association Agreement, aid, and loans. The Europeans hope that their aid will help Tunisia to progress economically, and thereby eliminate some causes of illegal immigration and Islamic fundamentalism. The EU and Tunisia have discussed additional cooperation to control illegal immigration and manage legal immigration flows, a subject that probably is of greater interest to Europe than to Tunisia. Aspiring for closer ties, Prime Minister Ghannouchi has said that Tunisia would like to secure an intermediate status between association and membership in the EU, and to seek a "more solid, more diversified, and more fruitful partnership."²¹

¹⁸ The U.S.-North African Partnership Program, formerly the Eizenstat Initiative, was folded into MEPI.

¹⁹ Remarks by President Bush, President of Tunisia before Meeting, U.S. Newswire, February 18, 2004.

²⁰ "Tunisian Leader Urges International Protection for Palestinians," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, May 23, 2004.

²¹ "Tunisia Wants Special Status with European Union: Prime Minister," Agence France-Presse, April 1, 2003.